How Reddit Built the World's First 'Digital Ghetto'

'Zionazi' and 'Kill Jews' have flourished in the site's online comments, and Jewish moderators say their concerns were brushed aside.

By Ashley Rindsberg

After enduring months of abuse on Reddit, a group of Jewish moderators finally secured a meeting with company officials in May 2024. The moderators, volunteers who enforce the rules of a subreddit, had been pleading with Reddit for months to enforce its own rules against antisemitism, which soared after October 7, 2023.

The derogatory slur "Zionazi" was being used over 2,000 times a month in comments on Reddit posts, according to publicly available data collected by moderators. New accounts flooded the r/Jewish and r/Israel subreddits with harassment, including Holocaust-themed usernames and direct threats. "Kill Jews" appeared hundreds of times a month in Reddit comments.

The moderators of Jewish subreddits had tried to stem the abuse on their own, banning hundreds of users every week, removing thousands of hateful and violent comments, and even making some of the subreddits, or user-run communities that make up the site, private. It made little difference. When company officials agreed to talk, the beleaguered moderators expected to hear that Reddit had decided to take action at last.

Reddit did do something about the antisemitic assault—but it didn't go after users who had broken the site's most basic rules against harassment, violent threats, and identity-based hate, according to the moderators I spoke to.

Instead, Reddit officials recommended to the moderators that they disable the ability to cross-post, or share posts, between the r/Jewish and r/Israel communities—and tens of thousands of other subreddits on the site, according to meeting notes reviewed by *The Free Press*. The recommendation was presented by company officials, including Vice President of Policy Jessica Ashooh, as a way to shield users from harassment, but moderators saw it as essentially walling off and isolating the online communities.

"The result of this recommendation would be our users being punished by having reduced use of features on the site when it comes to Jewish content, rather than Reddit going after the bad actors," said one moderator who attended two meetings with the company in May 2024. The moderators took Reddit's advice to disable cross-posting.

That was just the beginning. Between May 2024 and December 2024, Reddit also pressured moderators to switch their communities to restricted mode, in which only approved members can post or comment, disciplined them for flagging antisemitic and pro-terror posts outside of their own subreddits, and finally told the moderators to stop reporting violations anywhere beyond their subreddits, according to the moderators I interviewed.

Reddit's responses after being confronted last year about the runaway antisemitism in their communities left Jewish users describing the outcome as a "digital ghetto."

A Reddit spokesperson told *The Free Press* that the company responded quickly to investigate and address concerns raised by the moderators, including by implementing their feedback. The spokesperson also said the limitation against cross-posting was done at the request of moderators—and then reversed when they decided that they didn't want those limits.

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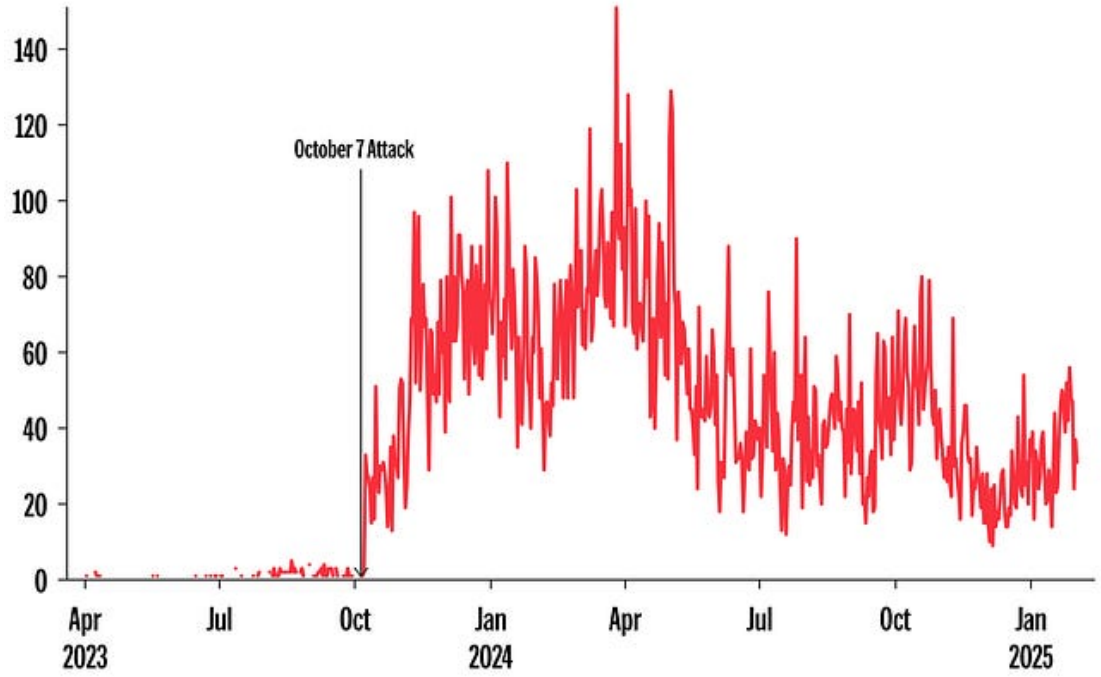
Reddit calls itself "one of the internet's largest sources of information." It has more than 100,000 active communities and over 110 million users who visit the website or open a Reddit app at least once a day.

This fact has not been lost on groups seeking to hijack the narrative on issues related to Israel and Jews—and to poison downstream platforms like Google and ChatGPT, which both pull heavily from Reddit for reference data.

In February, I reported on a sprawling propaganda network base-camped out of the r/Palestine subreddit. The network's core activities included laundering posts from the Telegram channels of foreign terror organizations including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, translating the posts, and funneling them onto Reddit, where they could spread. Following an investigation, Reddit denied the main thrust and most of the specific claims of my reporting. The company left many pro-terror posts on the site.

The Reddit spokesperson said that "every single person has a right to use Reddit free of harassment, bullying, and threats of violence." The company "vehemently condemns antisemitism," the spokesperson added, and does not "tolerate communities and users that incite violence or promote any type of hate, including any religious-centered hate."

Total Mentions of "Zionazi" in Comments on Reddit User Posts
By Day, from April 2023 to February 2025



The spokesperson also said that Reddit has “strict policies and procedures to prevent this content from showing up on Reddit” and has “continually strengthened these policies over time and introduced new tools to enforce them across our platform.”

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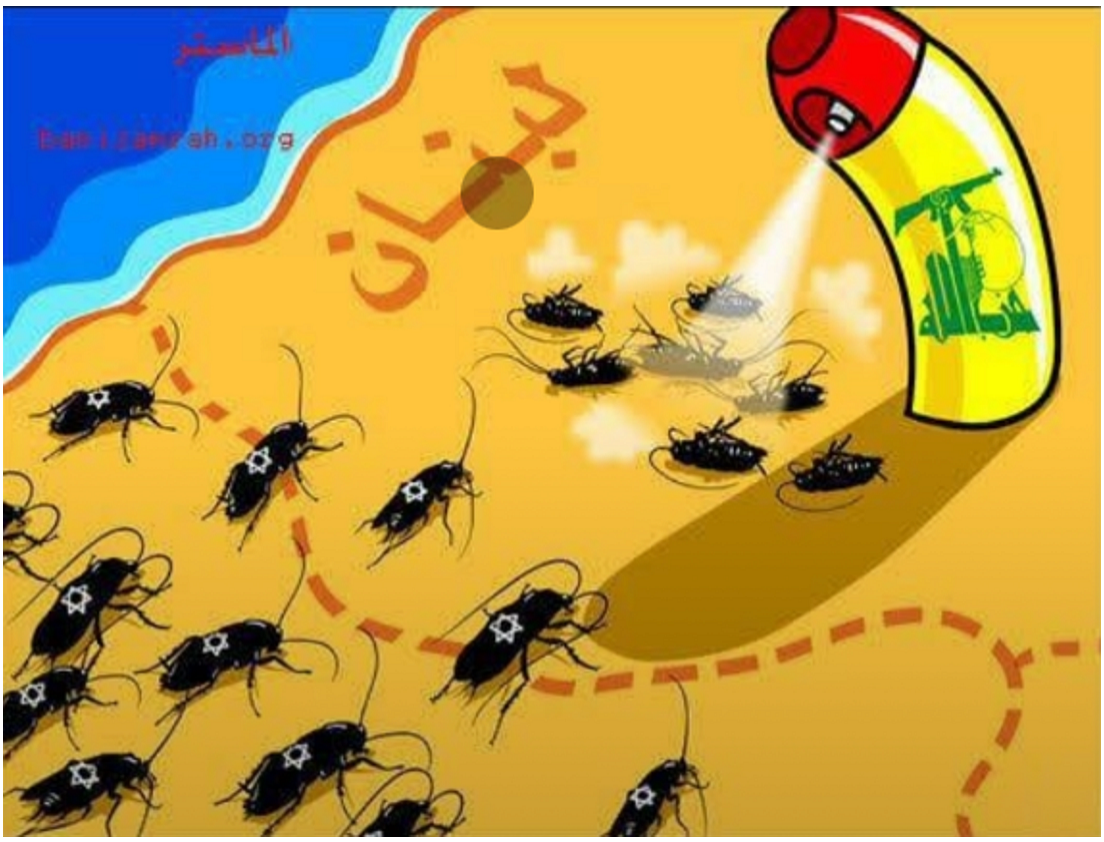
Those two words are fraught with historical weight. In the Italian city of Venice, leaders confined Jews in 1516 to a walled quarter, not out of overt hatred but as a compromise to contain hostility. Historian Robert Bonfil called it a “halfway house between acceptance and expulsion.”

The Soviet Union used similar tactics, excluding Jewish intellectuals not through explicit bans but through policy.

The parallels are obvious to Jewish Redditors. “There was a distinct rule set for users in the ghetto,” said another moderator. “If I posted the same things we get in our DMs but flipped to another group, I’d be banned instantly. But because it was about Jews, it stayed up.” The moderators I spoke to requested anonymity because they could face threats if their identities are publicly known.

Reddit’s enforcement history suggests a stark double standard. The company has banned entire communities for fat-shaming, anti-trans commentary, anti-Muslim rhetoric, and extreme right-wing politics. It also removed the pro-Donald Trump subreddit r/The_Donald and thousands of other subreddits in 2020.

But antisemitic comments like “Burn in hell u zionist pig” or “Judaism must be wiped clean off the face of the earth” are often deemed acceptable, with Reddit responding when such content is reported: “We’ve found that the reported content doesn’t violate Reddit’s Content Policy.” Jewish moderators told me that they were warned or disciplined for flagging this content, which the company considered to be “report abuse.” These moderators said that similar abuse aimed at other groups has resulted in immediate bans.



"In a survey early this year of over 1,100 Jewish users of Reddit, 95 percent of them said that antisemitism on the site had significantly increased since October 7," writes Ashley Rindsberg.

In a survey early this year of over 1,100 Jewish users of Reddit, 95 percent of them said that antisemitism on the site had significantly increased since October 7. Nearly two-thirds said that they hide their Jewish identity on Reddit, and 90 percent said they avoid certain subreddits altogether because of harassment.

Forty-one percent reported being told that they were banned from communities solely because of their Jewish or Zionist identity or support of Israel. Thirty-seven percent of Jewish users reported being disciplined by Reddit with warnings, temporary bans, or permanent bans after reporting antisemitic, pro-violence, or pro-terror content.

While many of us think of Reddit as a walled garden where niche enthusiasts and online hobbyists come to socialize, that view is out of date. Reddit has become one of the most important sources of artificial intelligence (AI) training and reference data, telling shareholders earlier this year that the company is "the No. 1 most cited domain for AI across all models."

Its messages and comments helped form the backbone of early datasets like WebText, used by OpenAI. In 2024, Reddit announced it had signed a roughly $60 million deal with an "unnamed large AI company," later revealed to be Google, for use of the company's data. The company also signed a deal with OpenAI for access to its fire hose of real-time content.

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The restraints imposed on Jewish users of Reddit after the moderators complained were exactly what their harassers intended: silencing Jewish perspectives throughout the information ecosystem. Subreddits with lower activity, accessibility, and viewership are buried in search results, get a lower priority in recommendation algorithms, and could become less likely to be part of datasets used to train large language models or data they access in real time through web searches.

Meanwhile, antisemitic and pro-terror content that remains on Reddit becomes part of the models themselves, with the site cited in AI-powered responses that contain bias and misinformation. Reddit also continues to burnish its image as an internet "good guy." Steve Huffman, the company's co-founder and CEO, is a member of the Anti-Defamation League's Tech Advisory Board.

When antisemitic abuse surged on October 7, the moderators of r/Israel made that subreddit private, meaning that only approved members could see posts and participate in the community. In the following months, Jewish Redditors created parallel communities to escape harassment. Fans of Israeli contestants in r/Eurovision launched r/Jewrovision, which is still private. Similar offshoot communities emerged for hobbies ranging from music to gaming, effectively isolating Jewish users in walled-off spaces.

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The harassment only escalated after the moderators met with company officials in May 2024. They documented coordinated brigades—a coordinated effort by users from one subreddit to flood another with comments, votes, or posts, typically to harass, manipulate discussion, or influence outcomes—operating from subreddits such as r/Palestine and associated subreddits. Posts made on r/Jewish and r/Israel were screenshotted, reposted, and used to rally swarms of hostile comments.

Reddit's code of conduct for moderators explicitly bans this "showboating," meaning these posts should not have been permitted under the site's policies. Once posted, they should have been removed, and the users who created them disciplined. Jewish moderators told me that when they reported the posts to Reddit, they were dismissed with boilerplate messages that said the content "Does Not Violate" the site-wide policies.

Some messages openly called for genocide, with comments such as "Judaism must be wiped clean off the face of the earth." Reddit's moderators repeatedly flagged this content, but thousands of pieces of antisemitic and pro-terror content also were deemed "Does Not Violate." Here are some of the examples:

- *"Judaism must be wiped clean off the face of the earth."*
- "Fuck the Jews"—posted in r/Jewish
- *"I pray . . . the next barrage of Iranian missiles are tipped with Zyklon B . . . That should be every last living Christ killers punishment."*

- "Death to Zionism, long live the resistance," posted in a direct message during Iran's attack on Israel in April.

Reddit also allowed dozens of posts praising Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, including, "Rest in Peace . . . your will lives on . . . the world will never forget you." Accounts with names like *HezbollahFan76*, *Hamas*, and *HezbollahPartizan* remained active despite direct appeals to Reddit officials by Jewish moderators to ban them. Users such as *killjews123123123*, *fuckjews666*, and *MuhHolocaust666* remain active today. So is *--intifada--*, a username created days after October 7.

The Reddit spokesperson said that the company recently updated an optional setting that allows moderators to automatically filter hateful comments by detecting them before they are posted.

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In August 2024, moderators who had been pleading with Reddit to crack down on antisemitism were invited to a video call as part of the company's "Adopt-an-Admin" program, which pairs volunteer moderators with Reddit employees.

Reddit vice president of data science and safety Tyler Otto joined the meeting. He strongly suggested that the r/Jewish and r/Israel switch from public to restricted status, which would force moderators to manually approve every new participant, moderators who attended the meeting told me.

One moderator recalled Otto laughing about specific instances of antisemitic imagery shared by the moderators during their presentation. Another moderator who remembered laughter said that it sounded more like Otto was "talking shop" and taking an "unfiltered" tone on the call. Either way, his recommendation felt like another step that would make Jewish communities on Reddit less visible.

In November 2024, moderators met with Jason Bigman, then a Reddit administrator who attended one of the meetings in May. The moderators said they complained about a Reddit post that glorified Hamas co-founder Ahmed Yassin; a doxxing attempt that used material from a controversial site called Israel Genocide Tracker; and a blood-libel-style misinformation campaign. (That post was later removed by the user who posted it.)

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Reddit took no immediate action, according to the moderators, only removing some of the content months later. But they received warnings for what was described to them as the "misuse" of reporting tools for "report abuse." Such warnings count as a disciplinary strike against accounts, which eventually result in temporary or permanent site-wide bans.

"It was surreal," said another moderator. "We were disciplined for reporting content that violated Reddit's own hate-speech rules."

The company's position became explicit in December 2024. In a meeting with Bigman and administrator Pablo Delgadillo, Reddit's community program manager, the moderators were told to stop reporting violations outside their communities.

"I would advise you . . . to consider not doing those reports in other subreddits," Delgadillo said, according to notes of the meeting. "I'd rather you continue being the guardians and custodians of your communities than be impacted by a safety mechanism that is not working as intended."

In February, moderators alerted the company to a comment posted to r/Jewish that said, "Burn in hell u zionist pig." Reddit declined to classify the post as a violation.

Moderators told me that they were given the same instructions again in January of this year. By then, they said, they felt that their role had shrunk from enforcing Reddit's rules wherever and whenever necessary to just a segregated corner of the site.

The Reddit spokesperson told *The Free Press* that the company no longer punishes users for "report abuse" and that the change was made as a result of its conversations with the moderators.

In February, moderators alerted the company to a comment posted to r/Jewish that said, "Burn in hell u zionist pig." In a video call, Ashooh, the Reddit policy chief, declined to classify the post as a violation, calling the case "complex," according to the moderators. The user who wrote the comment is still on Reddit.

As part of sweeping policy changes implemented in early September, Reddit has stopped replying to all reports by users and moderators with whatever decision the company has reached on a given piece of reported content, reducing transparency into how hateful or violent content is handled.

It doesn't help that Reddit has no formal definition of antisemitism. The company is now considering adopting one. But instead of embracing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition—a global benchmark recognized by the U.S., UK, France, Germany, and Canada, as well as over a thousand organizations—Reddit is leaning toward what some people might consider a narrower interpretation.

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That interpretation, called the Nexus Document, omits many of the most common forms of anti-Jewish abuse covered by the IHRA definition. An instructional guide written for colleges and universities after October 7 says that *intifada* merely means "shaking off" in Arabic. "On the face of it, the term does not invoke traditional antisemitic tropes," the guide says.

In April of this year, Jewish moderators brought an expert on the IHRA definition of antisemitism to a meeting with Reddit officials including Ashooh, Bigman, and the company's senior manager for platform safety policy and director of safety operations. The expert was Mark Goldfeder, director of the National Jewish Advocacy Center, and moderators told me that they hoped Reddit would be interested in his knowledge and point of view.

But after the meeting, they said, they were told by Reddit that it would cease all discussions with them. The Reddit spokesperson said that the company will continue to collaborate with the moderators and enforce the platform's policies. The company's overall approach is largely effective in responding to surges of content that violates Reddit's policies, the spokesperson added.

Whichever definition of antisemitism that Reddit chooses, it will still have a problem that it hasn't fixed. Making Jewish subreddits less prominent while allowing antisemitic posts and comments to stay on the site will only drive Jews and their perspectives deeper into the corners of Reddit—or off the site entirely.